



Are Zeus and He#ra# a dysfunctional couple?

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Are Zeus and Hērā a dysfunctional couple?

July 27, 2018 By Gregory Nagy listed under [By Gregory Nagy, H24H](#)

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2018.07.27 | By Gregory Nagy

A [sampling of comments on the Iliad and Odyssey](#) includes an attempt of mine to analyze a scene in Iliad 14 where Hērā has a sexual encounter with Zeus on the heights of Mount Ida. In my comments on the wording of the goddess at the moment when she initiates her encounter with the god, [at verses 200–210](#), I argue that this wording “derives from genuine theogonic traditions centering on the idea of sacred intercourse as an act of cosmogonic creation.” But I am forced to admit: “From the dramatic standpoint of the immediate narrative context, Hērā is making up what she is saying.” And the goddess is making things up because her ultimate intent here is to deceive the god. How, then, does the intent to deceive square with the cosmic prestige of Zeus and Hērā as the divine married couple who rule the universe of the ancient Greeks? Is their marriage dysfunctional? The question is sharpened when we view a close-up of the painting by James Barry, 1790, “Jupiter and Juno on Mount Ida.” From the looks of it, this couple is surely dysfunctional! But my answer, as I will argue in what follows, is in fact two-sided: yes, the marriage of Zeus and Hērā is surely dysfunctional in the “past” world of myth, but it becomes functional in the “present” world of ritual as a re-enactment of myth. To make this argument, I will focus on another scene in the Iliad where we see Hērā in the act of deceiving Zeus.

[\[Essay continues here...\]](#)



“Jupiter and Juno on Mount Ida” (detail; 1790). James Barry (Irish, 1741–1806). [Image](#) via Wikimedia Commons.

§1. The scene I have in mind here comes from a narrative that is embedded inside a speech made by Agamemnon, which in turn is embedded inside the overall narrative of Iliad 19. In this speech, at verses 76–138, the high king is attempting to reconcile with Achilles, whom he had dishonored in the narrative of Iliad 1. Here I turn to [The Ancient Greek Hero in 24 Hours](#) (H24H), where I quoted and translated and commented on the entire speech of Agamemnon, Iliad 19.76–138, labeled Hour 1 Text C. In a new edition I am planning for the printed version of H24H, however, I omit the quotation and translation and commentary, confining myself to a paraphrase of the most relevant parts in the text of verses 76–138. What follows is a preliminary version of that paraphrase, which I divide into two parts, §2 and §3.

§2 [1§36 rewritten, replacing the original printed version in H24H]

§2a. The paraphrase begins at a point where Agamemnon the high king admits to all the assembled Achaeans that he has made a big mistake, and the word for this mistake is *atē*, at verse 88 of Rhapsody 19, which for now I translate as ‘aberration’. The king’s aberration, as he himself says, was that he had insulted Achilles, thus dishonoring the hero, at verse 89. Already at the beginning of the Iliad, at

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verse 412 of Rhapsody 1, Achilles had pointed to the atē 'aberration' of Agamemnon, which had caused the high king to make the mistake of dishonoring Achilles, 'the best of the Achaeans'.

§2b. But now, while admitting that he had made such a mistake, Agamemnon claims that this mistake of his had been caused by the gods, verses 86–89, especially by a goddess named Atē, verse 91. This goddess Atē is an active personification of the passive experience that is atē. That passive atē is what we saw at 19.89, with reference to the making of a very big mistake. But what about the active Atē?

§2c. In referring to an active force at verse 91 of Iliad 19, this noun Atē is now featured as the grammatical subject of the verb aâsthai, which can be translated in this context as 'cause to veer off-course'. The same translation applies also later, at verse 129, where the noun Atē is featured once again as the grammatical subject of the verb aâsthai: it is said there once again that this goddess Atē personally 'causes' all her victims 'to veer off-course'.

§2d. But there is more to it: in the overall story as retold by Agamemnon, verses 95–133, this active force called Atē caused even Zeus himself to veer off-course once upon a time. In this further context, the same word aâsthai is used not only in a causative sense, 'cause to veer off-course', where Atē is the grammatical subject of the verb, but also in an intransitive sense, 'veer off-course', where the grammatical subject is the person who passively experiences the mistake, the aberration. At verses 95 and 113, this grammatical subject of the verb aâsthai 'veer off-course' is the god Zeus himself. And then, finally at verse 137, the grammatical subject of the same verb aâsthai is Agamemnon, who concludes his speech by admitting that he likewise 'veered off-course'.

§2e. Now we already know what the mistake of Agamemnon had been. But what was the big mistake experienced by Zeus, high king of the gods? How did Zeus himself 'veer off-course'?

§3 [1§37 rewritten, replacing the original printed version in H24H]

§3a. My paraphrase of Iliad XIX 76-138 continues, now focusing on the big mistake of Zeus. This mistake drives the story, as retold by Agamemnon at XIX 95–133, about the relationship of Hēraklēs with that hero's inferior cousin Eurystheus. According to this story, the goddess Hērā tricked Zeus into making it possible for her to accelerate the birth of Eurystheus and to retard the birth of Hēraklēs, so that Eurystheus the inferior hero became king, entitled to give commands to the superior hero Hēraklēs.

§3b. In another ancient source, the Herakles of Euripides, we see that Hēraklēs qualifies as the supreme hero of them all, the aristos or 'best' of all humans (verse 150; also verses 183, 208, 1306). Still, the heroic superiority of Hēraklēs is trumped by the social superiority of Eurystheus, who is entitled by seniority in birth to become the high king and to give orders to Hēraklēs. Similarly, the heroic superiority of Achilles is trumped by the social superiority of Agamemnon at the beginning of the Iliad.

§4 [a repetition from H24H 1§38]

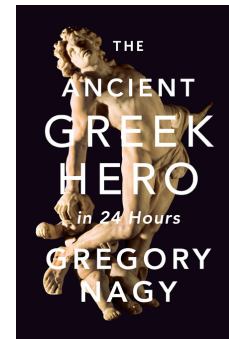
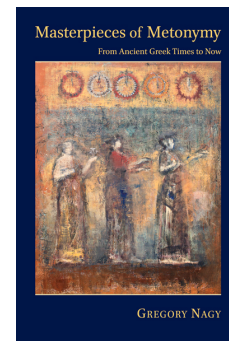
The twist in this story told by Agamemnon, in micro-narrative form, is made clear by the macro-Narrative of the story that is the Iliad. In terms of Agamemnon's micro-narrative, the point of his story is that Atē the goddess of 'aberration' made it possible for Zeus himself to make a mistake in the story about Hēraklēs, just as this same goddess Atē made it possible for Agamemnon to make a mistake in the story of the Iliad. In terms of the macro-Narrative of the Iliad, however, the parallel extends much further: the mistake in the story about Hēraklēs and Eurystheus is that the hero who was superior as a hero became socially inferior, and that is also the mistake in the story about Achilles and Agamemnon as narrated in the overall Iliad: Achilles is superior to Agamemnon as a hero, but he is socially inferior to him, and that is why Agamemnon seemed to get away with the mistake of asserting his social superiority at the expense of Achilles. Like Hēraklēs, who is constrained by the social superiority of Eurystheus and follows his commands in performing āthloi, 'labors', 19.133, so also Achilles is constrained by the social superiority of Agamemnon in offering no physical resistance to the taking of the young woman Briseis, his war prize, by the inferior hero.

§5 [a repetition from H24H 1§39]

The performance of āthloi 'labors' by Hēraklēs is mentioned in passing by the micro-narrative that I have just paraphrased from the Iliad, at 19.133. These Labors of Hēraklēs lead to the kleos 'glory' that he earns as a hero, and these labors would never have been performed if Hērā, the goddess of seasons, had not made Hēraklēs the hero unseasonal by being born after rather than before his inferior cousin. So, Hēraklēs owes the kleos that he earns from his Labors to Hērā.

§6. So, things turned out well after all? And they turned out well because Zeus, paradoxically, was deceived by Hērā? Not so. Things turned out well only because, as I argue, the cosmic dysfunctionality of the divine couple in the "past" world of myth is compensated by functionality in the "present" world of ritual as a re-enactment of myth. And how does ritual re-enact myth in this case? It is by way of performing, in the ritualized context of festivals, the kleos or poetic 'glory' of the Labors of Hēraklēs.

§7. A burning question remains: how are we to view the divine couple in the "present" world of ritual? Is the marriage of Zeus and Hērā still dysfunctional? Well, we would expect dysfunctionality—but only if Atē could still cause Zeus to make big mistakes by letting himself get deceived by Hērā. But that was in the "past" world of myth. In the "present" world of ritual, the goddess Atē is no longer in the company of the other gods and goddesses. She has been banished from heaven, as it were. In Iliad 19, the story is told about the action taken by Zeus in his anger over the mistake he had made, and I offer here my translation:



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|₁₂₆ And right away he [= Zeus] grabbed the goddess Atē by the head—that head covered with luxuriant curls— |₁₂₇ since he was angry in his thinking [phrenes], and he swore a binding oath |₁₂₈ that never will she come to Olympus and to the starry sky |₁₂₉ never again will she come back, that goddess Atē, who makes everyone veer off-course [aâsthai]. |₁₃₀ And so saying he threw her down from the starry sky, |₁₃₁ having whirled her around in his hand. And then she [= Atē] came to the fields where mortals live and work.

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The mistake of Zeus, his ‘veering off-course’, could not be undone, but Zeus now took a drastic step that prevented any further such divine mistakes. Happily for the gods, Atē no longer lives in Olympus: she was thrown out of there by Zeus for having caused him to make a mistake, and she landed on Earth, where she could now cause trouble only for us humans. We are the ones who make mistakes, while the Olympians no longer make mistakes—now that Atē cannot go back to Olympus. As I observe in A sampling of comments on the Iliad and Odyssey at [Iliad 19.76–138](#), I see at work here a theological fact of life: in the age of myth, gods used to make mistakes, but not today in the age of ritual. So, the gods got rid of Atē, but we mortals are stuck with her, and she is here to stay. But our consolation is that at least we have ritual—or, to say it more precisely, the ancient Greeks had ritual. In their way of thinking, the world of ritual would make it possible for them to keep the cosmos stable by trying to keep the gods happy. And the cosmos did work for them—so long as the divine couple that ruled the universe stayed happily married.

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